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On the Side of Restraint In Vietnam, an Aide Says

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WASHINGTON, April 17—

Well-placed Pentagon sources hinted today that Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird had been less than enthusiastic about bombing targets in the vicinity of Hanoi and Haiphong before President Nixon's decision to do so over the weekend.

Asked if Mr. Laird had urged or supported such strikes, conducted over the weekend for the first time in four years, a Defense Department official answered obliquely: "He's been on the side of restraint on Vietnam since taking office."

The official then recalled that Mr. Laird had initially opposed ground attacks into Cambodia in the summer of 1970 and had consistently argued for larger troop withdrawals than have military commanders.

Contingency Plans Noted

Two weeks ago, shortly after North Vietnamese tanks and troops moved through the demilitarized zone into South Vietnam, knowledgeable sources said, the Administration "dusted off" a wide range of contingency plans for consideration.

These included air strikes in the panhandle of North Vietnam and in the Hanoi and Haiphong areas. The mining of Haiphong harbor, the blockading of the North Vietnamese coast and assistance for South Vietnamese marines in staging brief commando raids on the North.

Officials said that on all decisions on targets recommendations for and against various courses may be raised anywhere along the chain of command from military commanders in Vietnam to Pacific Command headquarters in Honolulu, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Defense and State Departments and the White House itself.

What Laird Advised

On the Hanoi-Haiphong option, Administration sources said, Mr. Laird advised the White House that the area contained petroleum stocks and truck and tank parks of great military significance. But he also noted that even if these were destroyed, little effect would be felt on the battlefield for weeks or even months.

Division was moving south from Hanoi toward the combat zone and recommend air strikes and naval gunfire to try to intercept it.

The recommendation would go to the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Chairman, Adm. Thomas H. Moorer, would discuss the matter with Mr. Laird.

At that point Mr. Laird might decide the matter was within the authority already given and approve a specific raid. Or he might decide to refer the matter to the Washington Special Action group, the crisis team presided over by Henry A. Kissinger, or if haste was called for, might discuss it on the phone with the President or Mr. Kissinger.

When diplomatic implications are involved, Secretary of State William P. Rogers, or one of his top aides would be contacted as well. The State and Defense Departments and the C.I.A. are all represented in the Special Action Group.

"But he realized there were more than strictly military considerations," a Defense official declared.

Government sources said that until Friday evening the decision had been not to strike the Hanoi and Haiphong areas. In fact, they said, B-52 bombers and fighter-bombers were scheduled to make a major raid just south of the 20th Parallel in the vicinity of Thanhhoa and Baithuong.

But some time between Friday night and Saturday morning the President directed that the B-52's and certain other planes be diverted to the Hanoi-Haiphong area, the sources said. They also disclosed that a large number of other targets throughout the 200-mile-long panhandle of North Vietnam were struck at the same time. Roughly 200 aircraft were reported involved.

At a Pentagon news conference this morning, Jerry W. Friedheim, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs, said the government knew of where American prisoners of war were imprisoned "and we have not targeted any areas near them."

Military sources said that this was an example of the many constraints placed on United States warplanes operating over the North.

They illustrated the process by which targets are chosen with the following hypothetical example:

Gen. Creighton W. Abrams, commander of American forces in South Vietnam, and his Deputy, Gen. John W. Vogt Jr., who commands the Seventh Air Force there, might report additional streams of troops and supplies moving into northern Quang Tri Province and ask permission for heavy strikes in the panhandle of North Vietnam.

The request would go to the Pacific Command headquarters, which would have access to strategic intelligence from the Central Intelligence Agency, the Defense Intelligence Agency and the National Security Agency and from state department reports from embassies all over the world. The command might note that the 325C